

## QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

### KARL RAHNER AND DEMYTHOLOGIZATION

#### A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL H. BARNES

In the last thirty years, the theology of Karl Rahner has deeply influenced the life of the Roman Catholic Church. His transcendental method, theological anthropology, theology of nature and grace, all with their implications for sacrament and ecclesiology, have permeated the pastoral life of the Church. To some extent his theology is beginning to pervade the life of the Roman Catholic Church in a way similar to that of Thomas Aquinas. But these fundamental themes are a source of great debate in the Church, and, like Thomas, Rahner has his detractors.

Open debate regarding the theology of Karl Rahner and his influence on the life of the Church is both welcome and healthy. The future of the Church should be the result of open, honest theological discussion. It is hard to know, however, whether Michael H. Barnes is one of Rahner's detractors. At the end of his article a year ago in this journal,<sup>1</sup> he seems to paint Rahner's work in a positive light, both in terms of its content and its motivation. However, the body of the article does Rahner no great service and does not advance the debate.

The problem with Barnes's article is not so much that he challenges Rahner as that he misinterprets him. In places he does not present Rahner's thought correctly. If Rahner's theology is to become a locus of debate in Roman Catholicism, it should be based on a correct reading of his theological and philosophical positions.

Barnes's presentation of Rahner's theology is mistaken in four major areas: (1) creation and the self-communication of God, (2) the relationship of the transcendental and the categorical, (3) the nature of matter, and (4) the choice of demythologization as a central interpretive framework for dealing with the content and the motivation of Rahner's theology. Other mistakes flow from these, but they are the heart of the matter.

First, Barnes consistently but mistakenly identifies creation as the self-communication of God. He states: "So the universe is what God becomes when God becomes other than God. Rahner expresses this also by constantly saying that the universe is divine self-communication. The universe is God's gift of self."<sup>2</sup> Two key sets of terms in this quotation are almost code words in Rahner's theology. "What God becomes

<sup>1</sup> Michael H. Barnes, "Demythologization in the Theology of Karl Rahner," *TS* 55 (1994) 24—45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

when God becomes other than God" is a phrase used by Rahner to refer to the Incarnation, not to the whole of creation. In the section of *Foundations of Christian Faith* upon which Barnes seems most dependent in this part of his article,<sup>3</sup> Rahner is clear that what God creates is other than God's self,<sup>4</sup> and that God then relates to that other through the gift of God's self in grace.<sup>5</sup> Further it is clear that in the Incarnation the Logos becomes a part and only a part of the created world.<sup>6</sup> Rahner's phrases "divine self-communication" or "God's gift of God's self" are used to refer to grace, which for Rahner is a personal relationship of human beings with God, in which the rest of creation may participate through the human. In no way is Rahner implying that God's self-communication is creation. Creation may become the medium of that communication categorically, but it is not the substance of it.

Second, Barnes misrepresents the relationship of the transcendental and the categorical in Rahner's thought. Barnes states:

There are two aspects to divine revelation, according to Rahner. The first is the general fact of God's self-communication which constitutes the world, the history of the world, and human freedom in and part of the world. Rahner called this "the transcendental aspect of creation." The second aspect is the sum of the concrete historical forms that this general self-communication takes. Rahner calls this "the categorical, historical aspect of revelation." These forms "mediate" the general self-communication.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is the confusion regarding creation and grace continued in this quote, but the notion of the transcendental is misrepresented. In Rahner's thought the transcendental refers to those elements which constitute the human spirit and are the necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience as we know it. Among these elements are self-transcendence, the pre-apprehension of Being, freedom, self-relatedness which includes an unthematic awareness of these transcendental elements, and embodiment in time and space. Because Rahner holds that grace, the self-communication of God which can be accepted and affirmed or rejected by human freedom, is universally given, he includes it as a transcendental of human experience. Even though it is supernatural and thus not an intrinsic part of human nature, it is universally constitutive of human experience in a transcendental, unthematic manner. The categorical in Rahner's thought refers to the actualization or realization of the transcendental elements in the concreteness of time and space that is history. Because the human spirit is embodied, it is realized only in the concreteness and particularity of history.

Thus the transcendental aspect of revelation refers to God's self-gift

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 178-98.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 190.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 190-91.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 196-97.

<sup>7</sup> Barnes, "Demythologization" 33.

to human beings as spiritual luminosity and transforming presence in an unthematic manner. It transforms the fundamental structures of human experience so that God is no longer a distant asymptotic horizon of human self-transcendence, but rather is a presence at the very core of human experience. Rahner speaks of this transforming presence as quasi-formal causality. Just as a form abstracted from an object of sense experience shapes the experience of the human subject, so the presence of God shapes all human experience, not from without as a finite object but as a presence deep within the human spirit. This transcendental, unthematic self-gift and revelation of God, which Rahner calls the supernatural existential, becomes actualized for human beings only in the concreteness of the categorical. The categorical and transcendental are, therefore, two interwoven aspects of every human experience and thus of the experience of revelation and grace. They comprise a unity in difference; in human experience one cannot be had without the other.

The transcendental aspect of revelation and grace is not, as Barnes claims, the self-communication of God which constitutes the world and its history. It is not the "transcendental aspect of creation," a phrase which Barnes cites<sup>8</sup> but which is not to be found in the cited text. Nor is the categorical the historical aspect of the general fact of God's self-communication. It is intrinsic to the possibility of any revelation of God to the human, because the transcendental structures of human experience are realized only through historical embodiment. The categorical is a necessary element in the realization of anything in the human spirit as spirit in the world.

Third, while it is true that Rahner refers to matter as "frozen spirit," this phrase must be understood in the larger context of his thought and method. Rahner arrives at his understanding of matter, spirit, and their relationship by analyzing the nature of human experience. Both are understood from the inside out. Matter is the temporal, spatial arena in which the human spirit is realized and acts. Human beings experience matter primarily as the arena for the realization of the human spirit, which cannot be or act except in this arena. Matter in this sense can be seen as "frozen spirit," or primarily as the irreversible, historical arena of the expression and actualization of the human spirit.

It is by analogy that the larger realm of material creation can be referred to as "frozen spirit," for, given Rahner's method, all creation is seen as the possible arena of the expression of the human spirit. When Rahner begins to look at the scientific theme of evolution in the light of this method, he recognizes that matter bears the potential of being the medium of the realization and expression of the human spirit, and he speculates that matter in some analogous form of self-transcendence

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

has evolved toward spirit. The very reading of an analogous form of self-transcendence into matter is a result of Rahner's seeing matter primarily from within human experience, where matter does bear the human spirit. As Rahner states in the text referred to in Barnes's footnote 43, "We have seen furthermore, that matter and spirit are not simply disparate things but that matter is, as it were, 'frozen' spirit whose only meaning is to render real spirit possible."<sup>9</sup> Further, for Rahner being is a matter of being present to self. The intensity of being of any existent is determined by the degree in which it is capable of knowing itself.<sup>10</sup> God of course is perfect self-knowledge. Human beings know the self through the otherness of the realm of the temporal and spatial. Matter, which lies further down the ladder of this Neoplatonic hierarchy, is not as intense a form of being. It comes to know itself through the material embodiment of spirit in human knowing, and it strives self-transcendentally toward this realization in human knowing through its mysterious evolutionary climb toward the realization of the human spirit. To state simply that matter is "frozen spirit" without developing this background to Rahner's statement is to leave this theology open to serious misreading.

Finally, demythologization is not the best interpretive tool to uncover the substance, method, or motivation of Rahner's theology. Demythologization implies a removal of God from the sphere of secondary causes that shape human history. Barnes claims:

There are various traditional Catholic beliefs about how God acts in the world that would seem to add more specific divine activity to the general activity of making the world to exist with its own order of causality, as God's external self-communication. A list would include miracles in general, the creation of the human soul, inspiration and revelation, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the Incarnation of God in the historical figure of Jesus, along with other beliefs. Rahner offers an interpretation of all these beliefs, however, that supposes no additional action, no special intervention, on the part of God. In a word, Rahner demythologizes them.<sup>11</sup>

To claim that Rahner seeks to demythologize classic Catholic beliefs is to place Rahner in a dichotomy he is seeking to escape. It is to claim that God either acts as a secondary cause within creation and history, or God is removed and acts only as a distant primary cause. Rahner's entire theology from its central work in grace and anthropology to its handling of various doctrinal themes seeks to find an alternative to these two possibilities. Rahner finds that alternative by rethinking how God and human beings relate. The relationship of God and the human is thought through first on the transcendental level, in which

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," in *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) 167.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 69.

<sup>11</sup> Barnes, "Demythologization" 31.

God is active and transforming of the human spirit. This in turn shapes the world in which the human spirit is actualized. The Spirit of God can be said to direct a part of history which bears a special revelation by the way it transforms particular human spirits. Therefore, Rahner's theology of revelation involves more than having a particularly good idea in a world whose existence is God's self-communication, as Barnes describes it. The Spirit of God transforms and shapes a particular human consciousness which then affects the course of human knowledge, human history, and ultimately the destiny of the cosmos. God is active within creation in Rahner's thought, but his understanding of this divine activity does not place God in a role similar to that of other finite historical beings.

To understand Rahner's notion of the activity of God within the world one must appreciate the ways in which Neoplatonism is still alive in his thought. One realm of reality contains and can influence those below it in the hierarchy of being without acting in the mode that is particular to the lower form of being. Thus God can influence and reshape the human spirit from deep within its transcendental structures and unthematic experience. The human spirit shapes history and the material world. Rahner is not seeking to demythologize the world and Christian doctrines. Rather, facing a world which is already highly demythologized and secularized, he is trying to uncover how the presence and power of God move deeply within our world without falling back into mythological forms of thought. Miracles are possible not through some outside force acting within history, but by the transcendent reality of God shaping the spiritual reality of the human spirit, and then by these inner transcendental elements of the human spirit shaping the physical world.

Barnes is correct when he places the issue of secularization at the heart of Rahner's theology. But Rahner is not seeking to justify that secularization through a hidden agenda of demythologization. He is seeking on the one hand, to respect the proper autonomy of the created world by not describing God as another secondary, finite cause and, on the other hand, to show how God is present and active within creation through his presence to the human spirit on the transcendental level. This is the heart of Rahner's theological gift to the Church. It is here that debate about the value of that gift must center.

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A REPLY TO MICHAEL B. RASCHKO

Michael Raschko's final claim is that Rahner's goal is "to show how God is present and active within creation" without "describing God as another secondary, finite cause."<sup>1</sup> Raschko is quite right about this.

<sup>1</sup> Michael B. Raschko, "Karl Rahner and Demythologization: A Response to Michael H. Barnes," *TS* 56 (1995) 557-61, at 561.